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**Committee for the activities of the Council of Europe
in the field of biological and landscape diversity
(CO-DBP)**

Group of specialists – European Diploma for Protected Areas

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Room 2, Palais de l'Europe, Strasbourg

**‘DE OOSTVAARDERSPLASSEN’ NATURE RESERVE
(Netherlands)**

RENEWAL

Expert report by
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*Document established by
the Directorate of Culture
and Cultural and Natural Heritage*

The European Diploma for Protected Areas was first awarded the 'De Oostvaardersplassen' Nature Reserve in 1999.

Mrs Françoise Bauer from the Secretariat accompanied the expert on his visit to the reserve.

Appendix I contains the conclusions of the expert who proposes to postpone the renewal of the European Diploma. Appendix II reproduces Resolution (99) 18 which was adopted when the Diploma was awarded.

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I Introduction

In order to discuss the renewal of the European Diploma in the Group of Specialists on Protected Areas (PE-S-ZP), we present in this report the conclusions of the on-the-spot appraisal, carried out on 26 and 27 June 2003.

Our sincere thanks go to the management staff of Staatsbosbeheer and the invited experts. Their personal knowledge on the historical development and vision of the reserve, as well their ecological and management experience was extremely helpful.

Vincent Wigbels
Hans Breeveld
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Jan Griekspoor

During the introductory meeting in the SBB Centre general problems of environmental quality, nature management and research were discussed and were observed later in the field. Meetings with authorities of Almere and Lelystad and with representatives of NGO (Milieufederatie Flevoland) were most appreciated. Concluding remarks were discussed in the centre after the field visits; a successful meeting with the press took place (regional written press and TV).

During the on-the-spot-appraisal in 1998 in view of the application of the Diploma, special attention was paid to the problem of the surrounding environmental situation related to the plans that existed for the expansion of Schiphol Airport in the nearby area of Flevoland. Such initiative was regarded to be really incompatible with the recognition of the outstanding nature values of the Oostvaardersplassen, situated as core area in the 'Ecological Main Structure' or Nature Policy Plan and having international recognition.

In the report 1999, preliminary considerations about this airport dilemma were summarised as follows: *'Severe threats of major disturbances from air traffic and secondary effects of expanding facilities and related industrial settlements will be the long term result, bringing the sustainable maintenance of the Oostvaardersplassen at risk; this is contradictory with the Ecological Main Structure (Nature Policy Plan), the wetland and waterfowl functions in the framework of the Ramsar convention and the Africal-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA), the situation as a core area in the Natura 2000 network based upon EU Bird and Habitat directives and finally the development of the pan-European Ecological Network'...* *'The development of the Oostvaardersplassen as a unique and large-scale demonstration project with international response cannot be spoiled by the future presence of any new and expanding airport at a short distance.'*

As a preliminary condition the withdrawal of the Schiphol airport development in Flevoland was asked from the Dutch government. The Council of Europe has received the necessary confirmation that then allowed the award of the Diploma.

II Summary review of nature values and management results

During the field visit, we have been convinced about the values, the aims and relevant management choices and results of the reserve as described in the first application and the evaluation documents for the European Diploma and in the annual reports. Therefore in this report we have paid most attention to environmental changes and planned developments in the surroundings of the reserve, rather than describing details of the internal biological aspects of flora, fauna and habitats. Some aspects of the importance of processes are highlighted here.

The autonomous development of a natural series of ecological succession stages and zones is one of the most important characteristics and nature values of the Oostvaardersplassen, together with the international importance for large concentrations of breeding, moulting and wintering waterbirds. The dynamics of the ecosystem is maintained by the introduction of large herbivores (Heck cattle, Konick horses, Red deer) that could build up self regulating populations. These increased significantly with 11%, 14% and 33% respectively.

Dynamics also largely depend on the water level fluctuations, of which the causes are subject of research and monitoring. In order to avoid gradual water level lowering, resulting in explosive development of reedbeds, some artificial measures were taken in the earlier times, such as the construction of low dikes; two compartments within the open water and marsh area have been separated by a low dike in order to create different water regimes. Nowadays it becomes clear that one water regime is to be preferred, a so-called 'Rain model' (see Beemster et al. 2002. (A&W- rapport 341: 'Het regenmodel in de Oostvaardersplassen').

The dynamics of vegetation processes influenced by intensive grazing is carefully monitored. At present the diversity of grassland types developed positively, thanks to the presence of differences in soil types and humidity. Also gradients in grazing intensity cause a valuable grassland and marsh species diversity. Shrub and forest vegetations, however, are not longer fast developing as a result of grazing and by a lack of germination of most tree species.

The mixed regimes of grazing management led to a mosaic of following habitat types:

Water and bare mud	Rough herbage with Cirsium and Alfalfa
Pioneer vegetations	Rough herbage with Nettle
Wet grasslands	Reedbeds
Dry grasslands	Sambucus-scrub
Grassy herbage	Willow scrub and woods

Highest avifauna values are represented by the breeding populations of Great bitterns, Spoonbills, Great white herons and Little egrets, Marsh harriers and Hen harriers. Graylag and Cormorant breed in great numbers but seem to stabilise. Passerines as Bearded tit, Blue throat, Savi's warbler, Sedge warbler, Reed warbler, Yellow wagtail a.o. are numerous. About 30 breeding species belong to the IUCN Red List.

Large herbivore populations and related veterinary aspects were discussed; techniques to catch these wild animals for veterinary applications are not compatible with the nature reserve status (too much disturbance). It is agreed that natural mortality regulates herbivore numbers and that bodies are not to be removed, thus contributing to very specific and rare aspects of biodiversity. The acceptance by the public needs specific communication but does not present general disapproval at all. However, some private associations have formulated remarks on ethics that are not relevant for the management of the area as such.

The Management Plan 1997-2006 has been approved by the Ministry.

III Developments in the surrounding environment

1. Oostvaardersdijk

This dike separates the OVP from the Markerwaard lake (a section of the artificial IJsselmeer). The traffic speeds was not yet reduced to 80 km/h as it was recommended in 1999 in view of reducing collisions with waterbirds. The dike is being rebuilt at present (1m higher, 20 m larger) in order to prevent storm risks. These works require the removal of the strip with natural growth of willows and rough vegetation (visual buffer, migration function for small birds and other animals). As an integral part of the reconstruction it is decided to compensate losses by replanting willows at the foot of the new dike and some shallow marsh habitats will be created. (as asked in recommendations 1999).

At the Markerwaard side artificial low dams in the lake in parallel and at a distance of 125m from the Oostvaardersdijk will create shallows (4 m depth) over a distance of 1 km, where waterbird and other species can find shelter in stormy conditions at the lake. At the same time 3 observation facilities will be envisaged where both the OVP and the new foreland of Markerwaard can be overlooked. These works have to be finished end 2005; by that time only local traffic along the dike will be allowed. From August 2003 the dike will be closed for traffic during the work (information from Rijkswaterstaat).

2. Corridor Lepelaarsplassen

At the W of the Oostvaardersdijk the OVP continues with a narrow corridor towards the nature reserve 'Lepelaarsplassen' and 'Wilgenbos', N of Almere. The width of this connecting area was doubled (see recommendation 1999) and in this extension zone landscaping and surface lowering happens in order to create more functional wetland habitat.

3. Buffer areas of Almere, Fluitbos, Kotterbos and Lage Vaart

- The project manager of the city of Almere (Jan Bouwman) explained the planning of the proposed physical structure plan with extension of the buffer area and zonation of visitors.

The backyard of the town would be turned into front area ('city meets nature') with a more natural gradient in the enlarged plantations etc. The contact with the reserve and observation facilities ('nature boulevard') would be combined with natural barriers in order to prevent entrance of the reserve. The Fluitbos woodland of over 300 ha borders directly to the reserve and is freely accessible to the Red deer from the Oostvaardersplassen.

- The location and scale of the building for a Nature Activity Centre in this buffer, however, has to be reconsidered in view of not disturbing the reserve landscape and functions. Seen the rapid growth of the Almere population (700 school classes!) some 50.000 visitors are expected. It is also recommended to reduce the height of the Almere Buiten front building area to harmonise better with the open reserve landscape character.

- In the adjacent Kotterbos, restructuring and management is aiming more active recreation (long distance walks, cycling, campsite, etc.) without disturbing the buffer function of this artificial woodland (e.g. food for deer in winter). As the area is situated in a Special Protection area (EU bird directive) special permission are needed for these planned developments.

- The Lage Vaart as a SE border of the reserve is a favourite angling area. Some nature development creating more natural and attractive landscape and wetland strips could be combined with the function of the publicly accessible observation height 'Praambult'.

4. Lelystad buffer zones

- The Hollandse Hout functions as a buffer zone and a transitional area for the Oostvaardersplassen towards Lelystad. This town will be expanded in a 'green village' near this artificial woodland. The suitability of this buffer area for grazing by the large herbivores of the actual reserve is studied, as it is the intention to have these large grazers pasture in the Hollandse Hout in the future. This will be subject of discussions with the inhabitants and authorities of Lelystad in order to find a balance with recreational functions.

- Adjacent to the SE corner of the reserve, a triangular area bordered by the Knardijk, the railway line and the Lage Vaart with a surface of 230 ha is functioning as another buffer of the Oostvaardersplassen. As a contribution to nature development part of the area (15 ha) will be reshaped into a 'mini-Oostvaardersplassen - habitat. In this triangle the establishment of a large visitor's centre (Nature Activity Centre) is under consideration, including an Environmental Impact Assessment.

5. Planned wildlife ecological corridor Kotterbos-Horsterwold ('Groene Schakel')

From the Kotterbos the start of a new and very wide wetland corridor to the SE through the open polder area towards the Horsterwold and the Veluwe is planned as a part of the Integrated Development Plan for Almere. This could enhance the contact and exchange of the local red deer populations with those from the mainland. It is recommended that the location of this corridor is integrated in the physical planning review and that nature functions are combined with other needs (water management, recreation, local transport) when possible.

6. Lelystad Airport development as an intrinsic threat

The Oostvaardersplassen represent a specific type of large and undisturbed nature in its full ecological development. Apart from the intrinsic nature values, the attractiveness for eco-tourism in balance with the carrying capacity of the nature reserve fulfils a real public need and demand, which will still increase in future.

The further development of the nearby Lelystad Airport and its increasing air traffic risks to totally spoil the feeling of experiencing 'real wilderness'.

Further this is incompatible with the nature functions of regional, national and international importance as they have been recognised in existing planning documents. The NGO 'Milieufederatie Flevoland' has complained in this regard and a report has been prepared by Bureau Waardenburg, nov. 2002, as a contribution to the Environmental Impact Assessment .

If the airport for business and recreational aviation is expanding the consequences for the Diploma area are clear: a growing intensity of approaches and take-offs will disturb the reserve several times a day (up to twice an hour during daytime, later every 10 minutes?), even when a height of 2000 ft and a noise level of 50 DBA for the corridor crossing the reserve could be respected. This flight corridor, however, is situated just near one of most vulnerable zones of the Oostvaardersplassen (Knardijk) and future Visitors center. Proposals for avoiding or lowering the risks of disturbance (higher flight heights, re-orienting flight routes etc.) seem to create technical difficulties. (see Ministerie Verkeer & Waterstaat 2003: Luchthaven Lelystad-de nieuwe vliegroutes. Voorstel t.b.v. de PKB-procedure). We did not find any reference to the European Diploma award and the preconditions of 1999 in the documents concerning the PKB (the 'core physical planning decision').

The negative consequences of Lelystad airport becoming a daughter of Schiphol must be subject of specific impact assessments based on research and careful integrated analysis. This is needed as a consequence of the considerations and conditions about the Schiphol airport expansion formulated at the time of the Diploma awarding.

Also in the light of the requirements of the Bern and Ramsar Conventions, the EU- Bird and Habitat Directives, alternatives and mitigating measures will be legally required.

In the mean time the physical and environmental planning procedures must take this fully into account before irreversible infrastructure developments and building permissions are allowed.

IV. Research, education and legal status

- Monitoring and numerous scientific studies are carried out in cooperation with RIZA; they include vegetation mapping and follow up of permanent quadrates, habitat use of large herbivores, goose grazing usage, bird counts and monitoring of avifauna, etc.

- The temporary information centre of Staatsbosbeheer and the observation facilities are connected with nature trails. The bird tower near a Cormorant colony is most attractive. The number of visitors is increasing annually. The establishment of a new Nature Activities Centre at the Praamweg, surrounded by restored or artificial marshlands is planned and deserves high priority. This will also require new personnel with communication expertise.

No significant changes concerning legislation and status of the reserve are to be mentioned.

APPENDIX I

Conclusion: renewal subject to preliminary condition

Although many of the recommendations in 1999 have been taken into account, some of them are to be maintained or reworded in view of speeding up some processes and reinforcing the status of the Oostvaardersplassen.

The outstanding nature functions and values of the Oostvaardersplassen are well managed at scientific basis and can be combined with further development of social functions in a carefully balanced way. This requires long-term conservation strategies that are respected and integrated in physical and economic regional planning and procedures. Notably further deliberations and careful follow up are requested in order to avoid conflicting developments in the nearby hinterland.

In view of awarding the Diploma the Government decided in 1999 to withdraw the project of Schiphol airport extending in Flevoland. However, the proposed expansion of Lelystad Airport tends to have similar unacceptable impacts on the reserve that have not been mentioned or duly investigated in view of the European Diploma.

For these reasons we strongly recommend that the renewal of the Diploma by the Council of Europe be postponed as long as a specific EIA does not clearly demonstrate that the development of Lelystad Airport will not have direct or secondary negative effects on the functioning and values of the reserve in a long term perspective.

Draft Recommendations

1. Further efforts are required to involve the authorities of surrounding cities and the Province in a contact group or advisory committee in order to increase awareness and to discuss planning documents related to external impacts on the reserve.
2. Budgets for long term monitoring and research are to be guaranteed as well as for personnel (including communication expert).
3. The establishment of a new Nature Activity Centre (Praamweg), to be integrated in the reserve deserves priority.
4. - The further acquisition of external buffer areas must be completed;
 - Development of outdoor recreation and nature education within buffer zones of the Oostvaardersplassen needs careful approach to maintain their ecological functions (e.g. 'green village' Lelystad Hollands Hout, Bovenwater sailing/surfing);
 - Notably the 'green boulevard' of Almere cannot occupy parts of the existing reserve;
 - Planning of infrastructure incl. housing (reduction of building height Almere front) must guarantee a gradual integration in the characteristics of the open landscape.
5. - Monitor the development mechanisms of large herbivore populations in order to take ecologically sound measures if necessary;
 - Further explore possibilities to expand grazing management with large herbivores in buffer areas and corridors;
 - Further implement ecohydrological results indicating the need for unifying water bodies that are actually separated (one water management unit is recommended, requiring removal of an old dike);
 - Development of a communication strategy on the positive results of grazing management for fauna, flora and biodiversity in general is recommended (incl. website, papers, folders, exhibitions).

6. - The provincial physical and environmental planning must include the corridor between the Oostvaardersplassen and the Horsterwold, the width of which must depend on the needs of combined functions (recreation, transport, water management).

7. - The external pressures at the reserve caused by socio-economic development are to be avoided, fully respecting the internationally important and highly vulnerable nature values;

- Review of planning documents dating from before the reserve was established is recommended;

- Planning of alternatives and relocation of activities and flight routes in relation to Lelystad Airport are required in order to comply with the European Diploma agreement in 1999 and with international or EU conservation regulations;

- A specific EIA regarding disturbance of reserve functions and values by expanding Lelystad Airport is requested before the Diploma could be renewed.

APPENDIX II

COUNCIL OF EUROPE COMMITTEE OF MINISTERS

Resolution (99) 18 on the award of the European Diploma to the “de Oostvaardersplassen” Nature Reserve (Netherlands)

*(Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 9 September 1999
at the 678th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies)*

The Committee of Ministers, under the terms of Article 15.a of the Statute of the Council of Europe,

Having regard to Resolution (65) 6 instituting the European Diploma, as amended by Resolution (98) 29 on the regulations for the European Diploma for protected areas;

Having regard to the proposals of the Committee for the activities of the Council of Europe in the field of biological and landscape diversity (CO-DBP);

Taking into consideration the expert's report as presented at the meeting of the Group of Specialists for the European Diploma of Protected Areas on 29 and 30 March 1999;

Having noted that the Government of the Netherlands decided in December 1998 to no longer consider the extension of Schiphol airport in Flevoland – Markemeer,

Attaches as a condition to the award of the diploma that the development of this airport extension and similar projects also be abandoned in the future as they are incompatible with the objectives of the European Diploma;

Having noted the agreement of the Government of the Netherlands;

Solemnly awards the European Diploma of Protected Areas to the ‘De Oostvaardersplassen’ Nature Reserve in accordance with the Regulations for the European Diploma as a unique example of successful large-scale wetland development in a densely populated country,

Places the aforesaid reserve under the patronage of the Council of Europe until 9 September 2004

Attaches the following recommendations to the award:

1. In order to increase the awareness of local authorities, representatives of the surrounding municipalities – Almere, Lelystad and Zeewolde, as well as from Amsterdam and the Markemeer authorities – should be invited to become members of the advisory committee.
2. Budgets and personnel for long-term monitoring of components and processes (both physical and biological) are to be guaranteed.
3. The planned rebuilding/reshaping of the Oostvaardersdijk should take into account a number of ecological and nature management considerations, in particular the maintenance of its function as a corridor for migrating birds and the need to improve its potential for the observation of nature.
4. The further development of external buffer areas is recommended in order to better guarantee the sustainable protection of the internal nature values.

5. Official approval of the zoning and management plans, including the present expert's report, is to be confirmed.
6. The existing regional planning is to be reviewed and updated in order to reduce external pressure on the nature reserve, with consideration given to among other things things, the establishment of functional ecological corridors and buffer areas, and the relocation of zones for industrial, recreational and urban development.
7. Regulations are to be worked out in order to control the number of large herbivores –when necessary.
8. Exclude the Heck cattle from the regulations aiming to declare the Dutch livestock free from IBR (cow fever).
9. In view of the increasing attraction of the Oostvaardersplassen for naturalists, hikers and the public in general, new welcome facilities for visitors should be created outside the vulnerable parts of the reserve, in particular:
 - the building of the new visitors centre at the Praamweg, which should allow a reduction in visits to the most vulnerable core area of the reserve;
 - the translation into foreign languages of information materials (folders, exhibitions, signposts etc.);
 - the creation of additional visitors facilities within the western part of the reserve close to Almere-Buiten.